Force XXI and the Death of *Auftragstaktik*

by Captain Robert L. Bateman

What are the leadership implications of the current military technical revolution? Organizational and doctrinal changes are in store for the Army of the twenty-first century, but where do the leaders fit into the developing scheme of things? We must analyze today what the effects of these changes may be on our leaders and how they lead, before we are surprised by the unanticipated effects of our decisions. This paper addresses the issue of information processing and the possible results of the explosion in available information upon leaders and leader development in Force XXI.

> *"In my own mind, we are at the beginning of a revolution in the way we will command soldiers and tactical units in battle."*
>
> *LTG Frederick Franks*

Force XXI and the digitization of the battlefield can give maneuver commanders at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels an unprecedented ability to "see themselves." Concurrent with this development is the continuation of an ongoing effort to break open the information "stovepipes" which allow us to see the enemy. These changes may allow friendly information and data on the enemy situation to be seen and known by all with the correct hardware configuration and communications assets.

As postulated by the Tofflers in their books, *The Third Wave* and *War Anti-War*, we are at the edge of a new type of society, and by extension a new type of warfare. This information-based society and method of war depends largely upon complete saturation of communications technology within the target element. However, unless great care is taken to avoid it, this information explosion may result in the devaluation of at least one level of command, and the eventual weakening of the very fabric of our leadership development. The endstate where we may find ourselves is not the anticipated dynamic, decisive, and lethal leader-information combination, but a crippled force with indecisive leaders overwhelmed by information they have not been trained to assimilate.

"In the term 'Maneuver Warfare,' maneuver refers to an entire style of warfare, one characterized not only by moving in relation to the enemy to gain positional advantage, but also — AND EVEN MORE — to moving faster than the enemy, to defeating him through superior tempo."[1]

"The Tenets of Battle Command: A commander's success on and off the battlefield depends on his ability to operate in accordance with nine basic tenets: initiative, agility, depth, integration, versatility, flexibility, judgment, intuition, and empathy."[2]

"Auftragstaktik is composed of four essential elements — obedience, proficiency, independence of action, and self-esteem. In order for auftragstaktik to exist, all four elements must be present."[3]

Executing mission orders (*auftragstaktik*) requires a mind-set and an imbedded system of values which support the independent thinker, the decisive commander and risk-taker. *Auftragstaktik* has been heralded as the key to successful maneuver-based warfare since the publication of Rommel's *Attacks* in 1937. This linkage, between a system of warfare (maneuver vs. attritional) and the command process required to successfully execute it (mission tactics vs. orders tactics) is well established and supported by historical evidence.[4]

In the industrial age of warfare, there has never been a technological solution that allows commanders to "see" better when they operate farther from the front lines. In the era of mechanization, the decisive point for the maneuver commander has always been forward, preferably in a position from which he can personally observe and thereby issue commands which may influence the course of the battle. Communications advances have freed the commander from static locations and placed him on the battlefield with the means to issue orders to geographically separated units, allowing him to bring them or their effects to the decisive point on the battlefield. The ultimate example of this style of warfare and leadership within the American Army may have been embodied by Major General "P" Wood, commander of the 4th Armored Division during the breakout and exploitation phases following the Normandy Campaign and Operation Cobra. General Wood's personal leadership style and forward location are hallmarks of the maneuver commander in the Second World War.[5]

Auftragstaktik was a needed doctrinal leadership development to execute maneuver warfare for one great reason — it was assumed, and is generally true, that the commander forward knows more about the current situation than any higher commander not on the scene. This implies that orders are written with full understanding that, should the situation not meet expectations, the commander on the ground has the ultimate authority to modify the plan as he sees fit in order to accomplish the higher commander's intent. Mission and commander's intent are the overriding considerations; everything else is a means to an end. The empowerment of the junior leader and the reliance upon that leader's judgment are paramount, because it is assumed that only at the lowest levels can a leader see through the "fog of war," if only for a short distance. The assumption is that the lower the commander, the better he

can "see himself" and know his immediate threat; therefore, he is better equipped to make decisions. If a higher commander wanted to influence the battle, then he also must move forward to where he can personally observe the operations and the results of those operations. But what happens when that higher commander is provided the means to "see" both himself and the enemy over the proverbial hill better than the commander who is on the ground in the most forward position?

Digitization and the Emasculation of the Subordinate Commander

Force XXI and the theory of informational warfare rely heavily upon the concept of "breaking down the stovepipe information structures."[6] Translated, that means that information which traditionally flowed vertically from one echelon to the next, due to system hardware or organizational processes, may now be accessed by a greater number of users spread horizontally across an organization without the requirement for formal distribution at each level. Any "user" who needs information can access this information from any other echelon, providing the data is somewhere in the system. Conceptually, this may greatly increase the effectiveness of our corps, division, brigade, and battalion staffs, both in garrison and the field. No longer will the battalion S3 wait impatiently for information on the upcoming operation. As soon as the divisional graphics are created, they are available to all clients within the net.

Parallel planning may begin immediately at both the brigade and battalion levels, even as the division staff works to complete the plan. Brigade planners may also have instant information regarding the status of their subordinate units as they work to create a tentative plan and select what element is best suited to be the main effort. Reporting of location, strength, and equipment status is available at the touch of a button for staffs and commanders to evaluate ("see") themselves. Planning cells, operating from digitally linked battle command vehicles (C^2Vs) may look up to a 30-inch monitor and view an accurate map that shows the superimposed locations of all vehicles within the command. Intelligence officers may "look up" to access strategic and national reconnaissance assets to "see the enemy," greatly enhancing the speed and accuracy of their SITTEMPs. Then, with another toggle, they may "look down and receive digital photos from scouts and units on the front line, which may refine their SITTEMP even more. Finally, the battalion and brigade commanders of this digital force may enter their command vehicles, personally process the visual (and audial?) information available from the screens and their staffs, and make a decision. This is, after all, what commanders are trained to do. But what about that most forward of commanders — the one in a turret, the one on the front line who does not have multiple large-screen monitors and a staff to help analyze the reams of information potentially available to him. What about that lowly company commander?

In his cramped hatch, he looks out over the battlefield from his position. To his eyes, the battlefield looks the same as it might have during WWII — largely deserted, potentially dangerous, and definitely lonely. He may have access to most of the information available to the staff and commanders above him, but to see it, he's going to have to squint. His little 12-inch screen, tucked in under the deck of his turret, can only access one piece of information at a time, providing that it works, is not splattered with mud or washed out by sunlight. Given a minute, he can easily access the same digital map, which shows the actual location of his team's vehicles on a map with the latest graphics. But, due to the size of his monitor, expanding the view beyond the scale of his company/team is not practical. The map gets too big and the pieces too small without that large screen. Of course, he may "scroll" the screen wherever he likes, but he then loses the big picture. His problem is not information overload, but not being able to access enough information simultaneously. For the first time in history, the front line commander actually knows less about what is going on in his *immediate* area than does his higher commander.

This may not be all bad. After all, it is only at the battalion level where any synchronization begins to occur. The front line commanders receive their missions, move out, and draw fire. Theirs is the mission of closing with and destroying, and they may operate using *auftragstaktik* as their guiding principal. After all, when the operation kicks off, their plan becomes a guide, and the commander on the front line, who will *see* the situation in real-time, is expected to react as he sees fit to accomplish his commander's overall intent. But wait, what about that higher commander at battalion and brigade (and division?). In our industrial age army, that commander's place has always been up front, so that he too can see what his company commanders see and mentally orient himself on the enemy, decide on a course of action, and act. But in the information-based Force XXI, the best place to see the battlefield may be from within the command post vehicle. Now that battalion or brigade commander, if he wants access to all information, has been tied to a C^2 vehicle, that is, if he wants to stay ahead in the OODA (observe, orient, decide, act) cycle. Not only that, but because he *does* have better information, faster than his own subordinate commanders, he may end up telling them how to maneuver their subordinate units!

Imagine the scenario: A battalion equivalent task force moves forward from its tactical assembly area into a meeting engagement. The battalion commander, in his BCV, simultaneously surveys three large screens displaying the entire area of operations, with graphics and actual vehicle locations, confirmed enemy locations, and critical logistical information in a user-friendly format. His company commanders, bouncing across the terrain, have little time to look at their own displays unless one of their lieutenants wanders off into the mist again. Instead, they rely upon their senses and voice commands. Of course, their senses are degraded, not physically, but due to the increased area which the new digital force covers. Companies which once could only spread out over a mile now cover several miles; they will not get lost or separated since they are digitally "aware" of each other. Suddenly, in the BCV, the battalion commander observes a new icon on the screen — enemy tanks have just started their engines and been detected by one of the UAVs through thermal emissions. The enemy tanks are on the immediate flank of one of his company's platoons; he immediately broadcasts the warning directly to that platoon leader (who is himself separated by miles from his company commander during the approach movement), de-

scribing the threat and the immediate actions he must take. The lieutenant does not question his battalion commander, nor is there time to confirm with his company commander; he ACTS. It is only after the threat is avoided and the action well under way that the company commander has time to look at his display, rewind to see what happened, and mentally confirm that the battalion commander gave the correct orders to one of his platoons.

Still, the task force moves forward. Again in the BCV, the battalion commander sees what his commanders on the front line cannot. As the breach is initiated and supporting fires lay a smoke screen for the engineers, the commander notices another downlink, this time from a JSTARS platform. The enemy reserve has not been pinned or delayed by the FASCAM fired on their location, and are in fact moving forward from their concealed positions along an unexpected route. Again, the commander has beaten the enemy in the OODA cycle; he orders his own reserve to move forward and occupy a position on a shelf which is over the next hill from their current location. The reserve company commander protests. What shelf?, he asks. On his monitor the resolution cannot pick out the gap in the contour intervals and he is leery of placing his command in an exposed forward slope position against what to him is an unknown force.

The battalion commander knows better and repeats his orders. He has seen this ground through the UAV and confirmed that it is an ideal location to meet the attempted flanking counterattack. From his swivel chair he turns and directs the FSO to place fires in the grid where he has placed his cursor. The cursor becomes a fire mission even as the enemy counterattack arrives. The breach is successful and the task force rolls on. The battalion commander has learned that information is power, and he has certainly acted upon that information with lethal effects. But back to those other commanders, the dirty ones in the turrets. What of them? They have learned a lesson as well — obey orders from on high. Higher does know better. The information stovepipe may have been broken open, but they do not have a large enough bucket to catch all the information flowing out to them. They have seen their platoons issued direct orders by a higher level and they have themselves been forced to execute missions which, based upon their personal observations, appeared irrational, but were in fact the best in a given situation. Their commander knew as much about each of them as they themselves knew... and knew it at the same time. While moving, they had little time to look down, manipulate their computer interfaces, and access the same information sequentially that their commander could see simultaneously. Most importantly, they rarely got the chance to make an independent decision regarding the employment of their own command.

Implications for the Future of Force XXI

In the scenario described above, the decisive force on the battlefield was the battalion commander. *Battle Command* Draft 2.1 states that technology has the potential to revolutionize the way we command in battle by becoming "the tool that will allow the commander to move freely about the battlefield to where he can best influence the action without separating himself from his staff and other sources of information, communications, and control." To that might be added the realization that, on the digital/information battlefield, "moving freely about the battlefield" might not literally mean physical movement of the commander. Instead, he moves only his "eyes" (the UAV and various downlinks and uplinks from other assets) to where they can best see for him. He himself has become tied to the information node from which he will command. Another example to illustrate the point might be an experiment of sorts. Place a battalion commander in the Training Analysis Facility (TAF) at the National Training Center. Allow him full communications with his battalion, and observe how his command becomes centralized around him. This may not be all bad, by the way. It almost certainly is an effective method to increase our own decision cycle speed beyond that of any potential enemy and, therefore, it may save lives.

The Army currently has enough leaders with the proper characteristics to assimilate vast amounts of information rapidly and make timely decisions; after all, this is what we have been teaching our leaders for years. But what kind of commanders will those officers who "grow up" under this system make? They have learned NOT to question orders and operate according to their own assessment of the situation to accomplish their commander's intent. Instead, they will have developed under a system in which control is central and higher knows better. Their company "commands" were really glorified platoon leader positions, while the battalion or brigade micromanaged their actions in an effort to increase speed, bypassing the company as an independent element. *Auftragstaktik* will have died with the last non-digital company command.

In the original definition of the term, *auftragstaktik* had four components: obedience, proficiency, independence of action, and self-esteem. However, if any one of these components was considered paramount, it was the tradition of independence of action. This tradition cannot survive on the digital battlefield. And neither will *AUFTRAGSTAKTIK*.

Notes

[1]Lind, William, "The Theory and Practice of Maneuver Warfare," *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology* (New York: Doubleday) 1994.

[2]*Battle Command*, Draft 2.1, Department of the Army, Battle Command Battle Lab, Ft. Leavenworth, Kan., April 1994.

[3]Bashista, Ronald, "*Auftragstaktik:* It's More Than Just a Word," *ARMOR*, November-December 1994.

[4]Arquilla, John and Ronfeldt, David, "Cyberwar Is Coming," *Comparative Strategy*, April-June 1993.

[5]*Tiger Jack* (Ballantine Books, Inc.), 1976 edn.

[6]Sullivan, Gordon R., GEN, "Force XXI: Digitizing the Battlefield," *Army RD&A Bulletin*, November-December 1994.

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